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In our view: Costly breakdowns

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Divorce and unwed childbearing is expensive relational business. Not only does family breakdown stretch individuals' budgets and create a less stable environment for children, it puts an added burden on taxpayers — as much as \$112 billion a year, according to a new nationwide study.

The reason divorce and unwed parenthood is so costly is simple: Among other things, marriage helps reduce poverty because there are two potential wage earners in the home.

The Institute for American Values, Georgia Family Council, the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy and Washington state's own Families Northwest, located in Bellevue, released this first-of-its-kind research on April 15 to highlight the important role marriage plays in society, and to lobby for more programs that assist couples in crisis.

The authors of "The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing" write, "Because of the very large taxpayer costs associated with high rates of divorce and unwed childbearing, and the modest price tags associated with most marriage-strengthening initiatives, state and federal marriage-strengthening programs with even very modest success rates will be cost-effective for taxpayers."

After reading the report, available at www.familiesnorthwest.org/uploads/CostofDivorceFullReport.pdf, we buy the equation and agree that investing in more marriage-strengthening efforts is good food for thought.

Just as government-sponsored smoking cessation programs are thought to save tax dollars and lives, and just as government efforts to provide after-school programs or community centers are thought to reduce juvenile crime, fighting family fragmentation could be beneficial to taxpayers' bottom line.

In Washington state, researchers say 159,000 children were living in poverty in 2006, but only 48,000 of those children were living in a husband-wife household; 10,000 of these children were in households with a single male while a staggering 101,000 were being raised in homes with a single female. Women and children

are at an extreme disadvantage when two-parent families break down or fail to materialize.

Researchers also found that of the 502,000 Washingtonians impoverished in 2006, only 132,000 of those people were in a husband-wife family. The vast majority of people in poverty live in unmarried households, costing the state millions each year in anti-poverty programs. In our state, the researchers estimate a \$711 million annual tax loss because of family breakdown and its far-reaching impacts.

Don't get us wrong: Saving taxpayers money is no reason to urge people to stay in abusive or damaging relationships. And getting married after getting pregnant out-of-wedlock is often a bad decision. But there's no doubt more marriages would reduce poverty rates, increase educational attainment and reduce juvenile delinquency.

And where government can help marriages thrive — via public policy, programs or legal proceedings — it should.

At the least, this research offers another reason to encourage couples to get premarital counseling before ever saying "I do;" to rally married people to sign up for workshops or counseling sessions that provide oft-needed tune-ups; and to insist on programs that help keep people from becoming parents before they are ready.

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